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 USA Today
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There goes the Judge

The Central Intelligence Agency has always been a government office that took seriously the old Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. Whenever the CIA became interesting — to Congress or the news media — it meant trouble, and trouble meant that the collection and analysis of intelligence and the conduct of covert action became more difficult. There is little doubt that the greatest achievement of CIA Director William Webster, who announced his retirement this week, is that he saved his agency from the curse of interesting times.

Appointed to head the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1978 by President Carter, Judge Webster brought no background in intelligence hugging-mugging to his job. What he did bring was a commitment to competent, professional administration and a magistrate's sense of legal and moral propriety. At the FBI he presided over the Abscam operation, defending its nabbing of several members of Congress through a controversial undercover "sting" operation. In the 1980s he also presided over the construction of federal counterterrorism efforts and an enhancement of FBI counterintelligence operations. Under him, the bureau probably bagged more spies than it ever had in its history, closing down the Walker spy ring and several other foreign agents. He also upgraded the war against organized crime, and, with the FBI's help, the Justice Department put away a record number of mobsters.

But it was Bill Webster's major achievement at the FBI to rescue it from the bad rap it had gained from mostly legitimate domestic intelligence activities in the 1950s and '60s. He understood that, in the Reagan era, the time for most such operations — long-term undercover operations against subversives, potential terrorists and political extremists — had passed. But

he also was resolved not to wallow in guilt and retribution over what J. Edgar Hoover's FBI had done, usually with the knowledge and permission of Hoover's superiors and congressional overseers. When asked by a senator what problems his FBI was facing, Judge Webster told him, "My problem today is not unleashing the FBI; my problem is convincing those in the FBI that they can work up to the level of our authority. Too many people have been sued, too many people have been harassed and their families and life savings tied up in litigation and the threat of prosecution. So that we and others like us run the risk that we will not do our full duty in order to protect our individual selves."

It was precisely that achievement at the FBI that made Judge Webster an attractive candidate for heading the CIA after the incapacitation of Bill Casey, perhaps its greatest director, in 1986. The low point in the CIA's history — its savaging by the Church and Pike committees in the early 1970s — had long since passed, but the agency was still a punching bag for the spy-haters and the ideologues. Iran-Contra and Mr. Casey's own role (real and suppositious) in it didn't help. Judge Webster may not have been the most knowledgeable foreign-policy hand when President Reagan picked him as Mr. Casey's successor, but his unquestioned integrity and administrative competence made him the best choice, and he remains the only man in our history to have headed both the CIA and the FBI.

In an age when every headline brings new scandals from Congress and the executive branch, Bill Webster leaves a 13-year public career at the two most controversial agencies in the federal government with no whisper of wrongdoing or incompetence and with virtually no enemies. The uninteresting times over which he has presided have been good ones. His act will be a hard one to follow.